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TAGS: [ES](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)
SUBJECT: POPULIST SAN MIGUEL MAYOR LOOKS TO LARGER
POLITICAL STAGE

REF: SAN SALVADOR 1525

Classified By: DCM Michael A. Butler for reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (U) Summary: Will Salgado, the populist mayor of the city of San Miguel, plays a dominant role in the regional politics of eastern El Salvador. A political maverick known for his brash public persona, frequent party changes, and allegations of involvement in extrajudicial vigilante groups, Salgado believes that his candidacy could have a significant impact on the outcome of the 2009 Presidential elections. End summary.

San Miguel's Favorite Son

¶2. (U) On October 12, Political Counselor and Deputy traveled to the city of San Miguel to meet with populist mayor Will Salgado. San Miguel (population 282,367), the second largest city in El Salvador, is the capital of the Department of San Miguel and the economic hub of the eastern portion of the country. It is also notorious as a major source of migrants to the U.S., many of them illegal. As with virtually every other Salvadoran municipality of any size, San Miguel has serious problems with gangs and violent crime, as well as street-level drug sales and drug addiction.

¶3. (SBU) Will Salgado is a throwback to the days of old school populist politicians. A prominent local businessman and former Army Sergeant who fought in the Salvadoran civil war during the 1980's, Salgado was first elected mayor of San Miguel as a member of the Christian Democratic Party (PDC) in ¶2000. He then moved to the National Republican Alliance Party (ARENA) in 2003. In 2005, Salgado opted to depart ARENA in favor of the National Conciliation Party (PCN). This also proved to be a short-lived evolution, as Salgado returned to the PDC in 2007. Despite various political permutations, Salgado has remained moored to the far right of the Salvadoran political spectrum, as well as vehemently critical of the "communists" in the opposition Farabundo Marti Liberation Front (FMLN).

¶4. (SBU) In addition to his frequent shifts in party affiliation, Salgado is also famous for an oversized public persona. Salgado cultivates a regular guy image which resonates with San Miguel voters, but often makes him the subject of scorn and ridicule in the national media. Salgado frequently uses colloquial language and profanity in public settings, and makes numerous references to his humble origins and self-propelled rise to business prominence. His plebeian tactics also backfire on occasion, however, as he discovered last year after his use of colorful slang to describe a San Miguel beauty contest participant (referring to her as literally "uglier than a spider") caused a stink that did not die down until Salgado personally apologized. This and other verbal indiscretions notwithstanding, Salgado's positive local polling numbers are amongst the strongest of any

Salvadoran politician. These numbers are likely enhanced by Salgado's sponsorship of a local soccer team and municipal festivities, as well as the frequent television and radio appearances that he uses to enhance his reputation for getting things done for San Miguel's voters. (Note: Salgado owns a local San Miguel television station, as well as a regional chain of furniture stores which offer credit to less-qualified customers. End note).

15. (C) There is also allegedly a darker side to Salgado's populist appeal. Long rumored to be involved with vigilante groups engaged in extrajudicial executions of street gang members and other criminals, in 2005 Salgado was arrested and prosecuted on homicide and conspiracy charges. The case against Salgado, part of a larger prosecution brought against a vigilante group known as "La Sombra Negra" ("the Dark Shadow"), was dismissed on appeal in 2006. There have also been vague but persistent allegations that Salgado is involved in smuggling of merchandise related to his furniture business, as well as even fuzzier accusations of a connection to human trafficking. None of these allegations have to date been substantiated, and, perhaps most importantly from Salgado's perspective, they have had little impact on his popularity with San Miguel voters.

The Mayor Will See You Now

16. (C) During a one hour office call and subsequent private lunch, Salgado engaged poloffs in a wide-ranging conversation. After noting that he has declared his "pre-candidacy" for the PDC's 2009 Presidential ticket, Salgado launched into an analysis of the political dynamics underpinning the upcoming elections. Arguing that ARENA has

"reached the end of a cycle," Salgado opined that voter discontent, disgust with corruption within ARENA ranks, and "desperation for change" have swung electoral momentum in the FMLN's favor. Although ARENA is "stubbornly trying to impose a fifth straight Presidential candidate" on the Salvadoran electorate, Salgado told poloffs that with journalist turned politician Mauricio Funes out front, the FMLN has "a good chance of winning." Noting that a local San Miguel poll gave Funes "a 98 percent chance" of winning the upcoming elections, Salgado warned that an FMLN government would impose draconian economic policies leading to "the destruction" of independent businessmen such as himself.

17. (C) Turning to his own Presidential candidacy, Salgado stated that if he aggressively campaigned, he could draw enough votes away from ARENA to "ensure" an FMLN victory. After a notable pause, Salgado then declared that he is "not obsessed with being a Presidential candidate," and will only push his Presidential campaign "if it will help ensure stability in El Salvador." When asked if he would consider running for President on the ticket of a coalition of smaller parties including the PDC, the PCN, and others, Salgado dismissively stated "there is no third option in the Salvadoran political spectrum," and concluded that "there is no use in being President if you don't control the National Assembly."

18. (C) In response to a query as to why he has changed party affiliation so many times, Salgado launched into an extensive discussion of corruption. Alleging that corruption is rampant at the municipal level across the entire country, Salgado told poloffs that his departure from the PDC and PCN both stemmed from his refusal to engage in corruption. Getting more specific, Salgado stated that during his stint with the PCN, he rebuffed repeated demands that he award municipal contracts to companies owned by cronies of the political party leadership, including former PCN legislative assembly deputy Roberto Silva, who is awaiting extradition from the U.S. on charges of money laundering and official corruption. Salgado also matter-of-factly stated that current PDC faction leader Rodolfo Parker regularly pressures him to reward municipal contracts and do other financial

favours for political allies. Drawing a distinction between himself and his political colleagues, Salgado stated that as a businessman he "pays more taxes than all of them combined," and that as a politician he has "never accepted one cent" that he didn't earn.

¶9. (C) Salgado was equally frank when turning to crime and public security. He explained that street gang extortion of San Miguel businesses is a major problem, and noted that gang members charge local businesses an average of USD 3,000 per month protection money, an amount that forces many local businesses already facing uncertain economic circumstances to go under. When asked what policies or law enforcement approaches could best counter the street gangs, Salgado paused and said that he would share "half of the truth" with us. He then stated that while "other measures" against gang members are the most effective approach, he would not discuss those. He declined to be more specific when pressed as to the meaning of "other measures," and instead noted that in the wake of the recent arrest of several San Miguel-based PNC officers allegedly involved in the extrajudicial killing of gang members (reftel), the gangs have become even more assertive in extorting local businesses. (Note: Poloffs took Salgado's reference to "other measures" to mean the extrajudicial killing of gang members. End note.)

¶10. (C) Salgado stated that drug addiction was at the heart of El Salvador's gang problem, and that gang members must be "separated" from Salvadoran society, put into some sort of institutions where they can be "detoxified," and given job training. He went on to observe that drug addiction among gang members is more severe in San Miguel than in San Salvador, and that illegal drugs are more readily available in San Miguel owing to the close proximity to the borders with Honduras and Nicaragua. This in turn lead to Salgado alleging that San Miguel's drug problems are exacerbated by corruption within the National Civilian Police (PNC), who, as "everyone in San Miguel knows," are bribed by gang members, drug traffickers, and organized crime. Salgado then concluded his ruminations with the observation that the U.S. practice of deporting Salvadoran nationals with criminal backgrounds is also a major factor behind San Miguel's sky-high crime rates.

Comment

¶11. (C) In person, Salgado comes across as somewhat more thoughtful and nuanced than the oversized public persona depicted in the media. His analysis of the potential impact

of voter discontent with ARENA tracks reasonably closely with what we have heard from other interlocutors and seen suggested in polling data. Salgado's comments on the prevalence of corruption within the ranks of the PDC and PCN, and its spillover into municipal government, also strike us as very plausible.

¶12. (C) That said, anything Salgado says needs to be taken along with a grain of salt. Salgado's contention that his aggressively campaigning for President in 2009 would draw away enough votes from ARENA to ensure an FMLN victory is both self-serving and overblown. While Salgado is certainly the most popular politician in San Miguel, his appeal is likely to remain a local, or, at best, a regional phenomena. Even should he mount a serious campaign, his impact on the 2009 Presidential election would probably not be as significant as he suggests. (Note: PDC leadership has made clear to us that Salgado will not/not run for President representing that party in 2009. End note). Salgado's views on police corruption in San Miguel seem idiosyncratic, and are most likely the result of lingering animus over his 2005 arrest at the hands of the PNC.

¶13. (C) Although Salgado's apparent tacit support for the extrajudicial execution of street gang members is troubling in and of itself, it more importantly reflects a far more

serious dynamic lurking on the fringes of Salvadoran society.

With violent crime rates consistently high, and street gangs ever more brazenly extorting small and medium-sized businesses, the Salvadoran public is losing confidence in the ability of the PNC, the judiciary, the main political parties, and even the state itself to deliver on promises of improved public security. Should this trend continue, the "other means" alluded to by Salgado may come to strike many Salvadorans as a viable tactic for prevailing in the nation's ongoing struggle with violent street gangs. End comment.
Glazer